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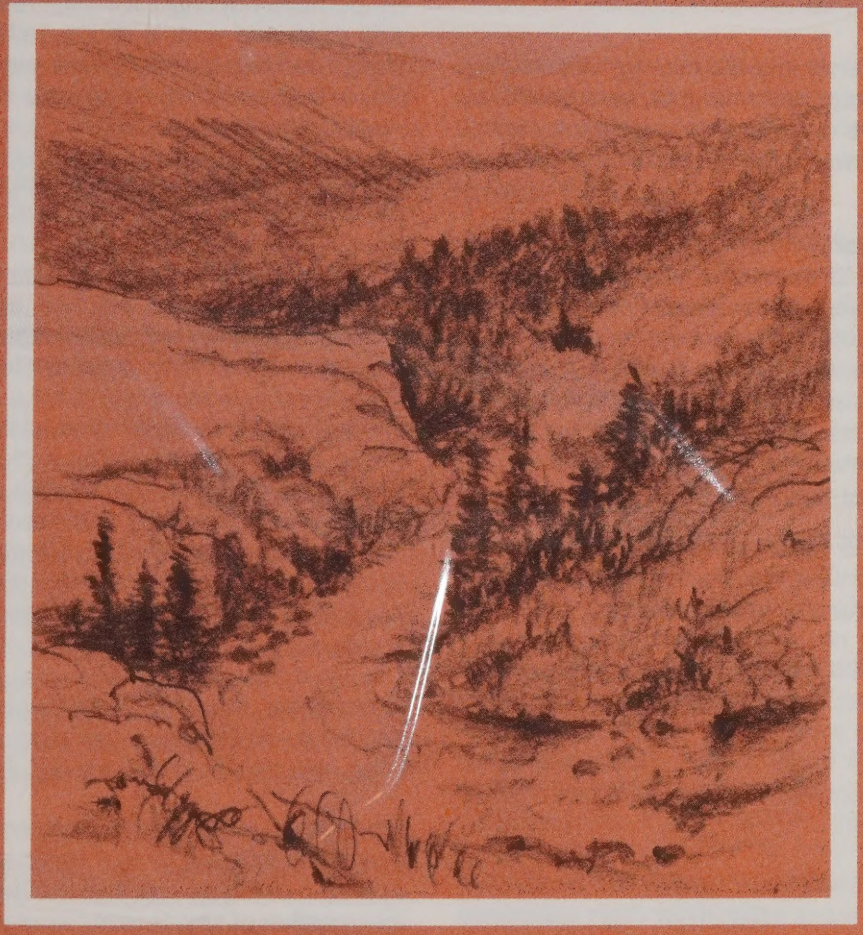
CANOEING in the Northwest Territories



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By Bil Gilbert

I suppose that if one is needed, an excuse for what follows is the lack of commonplace information for those thinking about a venture into the sub-arctic outback.

This is particularly true of that great stretch of water, muskeg, scrub and rock that lies between the Mackenzie River and Hudson Bay and from Great Slave Lake in the south to Great Bear Lake and the Arctic Ocean in the north.

That there is so little traveler's guide type material in itself gives some hint as to the character of the central Northwest Territories. There is not much expertise available because the land has never been much used by man.

Native peoples survived in the country for centuries, but they were always few in number, were bound to a few food sources — notably the migrating caribou herds and fresh water fish — and life was always marginal.

Nor during the past 150 years, have Europeans been able or inclined to settle the country extensively. Today the Northwest Territories, which in area is half the size of the United States, is occupied by only 37,000 permanent residents. The advent of the airplane has, of course, vastly improved man's ability to get about in this large empty region, but the requirements or deterrents to overland travel remain more or less what they have always been.

During the past 25 years, as a writer and naturalist, I have made a half dozen trips by canoe into the arctic and sub-arctic areas of North America.

In duration the trips have varied from several weeks to several months. They have been immensely satisfying, stimulating experiences, but by no stretch of the imagination or vanity do they constitute grounds for making any dogmatic pronouncements on how to cope with the North.

In southern Canada and throughout the United States there are areas which if not virgin wilderness are in terms of flora, fauna and lack of human use still very wild places, however, in general they are managed wilderness parks, preserves or sanctuaries. They are established and defined by law, protected and managed by public regulations and agents.

But in opposition, the empty land in the central Northwest Territories is a true, self protecting wilderness. Here there exist what might be called environmental imperatives, that have and do curtail the amount of human use and dictate the behaviour of men who do enter it. This is a wilderness, not by legislative act, but because it has been too hard a place for man to tame.

Though it may seem trivial to those who have not experienced them, biting, puncturing, sucking insects are one of the true realities and imperatives of the North. In the short summer season they emerge by the billions from the water and muskeg.

The objective of each individual beast is to get a square meal of warm blood. Their ferocity is difficult to exaggerate. They will poison the body, unhinge the mind and on occasion can kill if a man goes down and is immobilized in the bush.

They most definitely influence behaviour.

There are always days, for example, when sun and temperature not only permit but make it desirable to strip down and work in shorts, rather than sweating along swaddled in heavy shirts and pants. However, only a masochist would so bare himself to the armadas of arctic bugs.

Often one will make a roundabout portage, climbing and carrying over bare rocks, to avoid taking a more direct but low lying route on which he inevitably will be ambushed by bugs rising up from the vegetation.

I for one have spent two nights in the North jumping in and out of a cold river to get some bug relief.

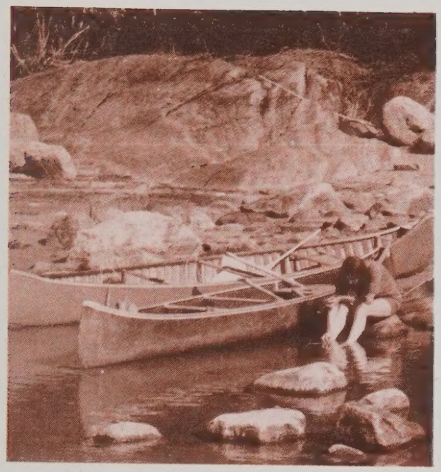
One camps on open islands, points of land, sand bars where the lack of vegetation and the sweep of the wind tends to discourage insects. Repellants, tents with tight mosquito bars and headnets are not convenience but necessities. Also imperative is a certain aptitude for stoicism. Nothing totally defeats the northern bugs. They are something that must be endured.

Regardless, northern Canada's summer weather is delightful — of the sort that more southerly resorts often advertise but often cannot deliver.

Speaking to a Yellowknife resident prior to my first canoe trip into the central arctic some eight years ago, he mentioned "we think we have the best summer weather of anyplace in the whole bloody world". Considering his location, more or less on the rim of civilization, I initially decided that this comment was a good example of local chauvinism.

However, later experience has convinced me that he wasn't exaggerating, at least not grossly.

As a general thing, summer days are clear, sunny and dry with the annual precipitation being about the same as Arizona desert country. That half the land area is covered by water is accounted for by the fact that evaporation is minimal and drainage slow. What water falls tends to remain in the rocky lake and river basins.



The sunny summer days are also long, 18 to 20 hours of workable light throughout the season. The midnight sun phenomenon takes a bit of getting used to but after a time it begins to seem that the whole world would be a better place if it could enjoy such conditions.

Temperatures are wonderfully moderate, in the 50 to 70 degree range, and are ideal for lugging heavy packs or portaging canoes. Though it is well to have a bit of extra down in sleeping bags and jackets for the occasional brisk spell, one should be prepared for the kind of summer weather found in the Great Lakes region — with the bonus that there will be much less, though some, rain.

Pleasant as it is, the arctic summer is very short. If one plans to be in the bush much before mid-June or after mid-September he should make preparation for cold weather. If such preparations have not been made, it is imperative that travelers not be caught in the wilderness after the freeze. It does not take much experience, imagination or research to know that the winters in that part of the country are ferocious.

The interior of the Northwest Territories is fully mapped. But although they give a traveler a general idea of where he is and how to get where he wants to go, they are too small in scale to solve certain specific topographic problems. There are such problems since this is a maze country of innumerable small and large bodies of water, ridges and ravines, swamps, points and islands.

Additionally it is the north country in which, due to proximity to the magnetic pole, compass corrections must be made. Even if one is reasonably skillful at using topographic maps and compass, there comes a time, especially on long complicated portages when a certain amount of reconnaissance, trial and error progress is required.

In many cases, former portage trails are marked on topo maps but not infrequently these have disappeared through disuse and must be recleared. Inevitably there comes times and places when the only alternative is to find and clear new portage trails through the bush.

Portaging, even over the best know trails, is hard work. On an extended trip, say of a month or more, one man does well to carry all of his own gear and share of provisions in one pack trip. In addition, the canoes themselves must be carried and there are usually odds and ends. All of which means that more often than not, two roundtrips are required. Thus a one mile portage is in fact a four mile walk, back and forth twice.

Carrying heavy loads anyplace is work and in this wilderness it may be a bit more. The footing is seldom good and the bugs, again, are almost always bad. There may very well be a drill in purgatory that involves the inmates carrying a 17-foot canoe over their heads with 26 moose flies inside the gunwhales.

Because of the kind of country it is, travel is slow as well as hard. It is unwise and can even be dangerous to plan a trip that demands one make a certain amount of mileage each day. It is not a good place for keeping schedules, particularly if food supplies are pegged to such schedules.

If, for example, one plots out a course that requires making 15 miles a day, the trip will probably be easier, safer and far more informative if the distance is halved.

All other problems and considerations, weather, bugs, supplies, pathfinding, are sharpened because the northern bush is true, unpopulated wilderness. Once one leaves the last settlement he is on his own, must support himself and, possibly, get himself out of difficulties.

Aerial search and rescue is of course possible but it's expensive, risky and not always successful. Also

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there is, or would seem to me to be, considerable humiliation involved in being the object of such a manhunt and being pulled out of the bush by a police patrol.

Losing oneself, losing supplies, being poisoned by insects, gashing a leg, spraining or breaking an ankle, any number of other accidents that elsewhere might be annoying, inconvenient or painful can become true catastrophes in a true wilderness. Constant prudence is necessary simply because the penalties for imprudence are so greatly magnified by isolation.

All of which I think particularly applies to canoe parties. There are many places in lower Canada and the United States where one can find white water that is just as formidable in terms of the type of paddling techniques required in the Territories.

However, no place else are there such isolated waters.

Again extreme prudence is necessary. For example, the six of us who were on the Yellowknife-Coppermine river system this past summer had previously spent a lot of time in white water, had raced competitively and had taught white water canoeing.

Nevertheless we often ducked rapids, by carrying around or lining through with ropes, that in other places and circumstances we would have run without much hesitation. Flipping over in white water in the south is something to be avoided but it will be chanced for the sake of excitement and because if a flip occurs it is not a great calamity.

Here the water is so cold, in the 35 to 40 degree range, that it numbs and cramps quickly and you are so far from help that losing a food bag, stoving a canoe or bashing yourself against rocks and boulders can literally be tragic.

White water canoeing is, I think, one of the better and more thrilling sports, but the Northwest Territories is not a good place to perform feats of derring-do. In a sense the thrill comes from surviving and taking care of yourself, not in practicing sophisticated and risky manoeuvers in white water.

Covered, kayak-type canoes — sometimes called banana boats — are now popular with white water enthusiasts. Unquestionably because of their decking they permit one to run bigger and more difficult rapids. However, subduing the most formidable possible white water is not the point, nor do I think it should be the point of canoeing in the northern wilderness.

In comparison to the open style canoe, the banana boats are hard to load and unload, more difficult to carry on portages, less comfortable on a long trip and less manoeuverable in strong winds such as often are encountered on the inland lakes. I, at least for northern canoe trips, have always used open aluminum canoes.

They carry a lot of gear, can be carried by one man and are very durable.

It is possible to bring or ship one's own canoe for travel in northern Canada, but considering how far the Territories is from the rest of the populated world it is perhaps more practical, even less expensive, to lease them as near to the point of embarkation as possible.

Among other suppliers, the Hudson's Bay Company operates a U-Paddle service. Canoes can be picked up wherever the store had a depot and can be dropped off wherever the Hudson's Bay agent can pick them up.

My own experience with this system has been good; that is the canoes have been in good shape and available where and when ordered. But since there is a limited number of canoes available and the demand is growing, it's important to make reservations well, months, in advance.

What with tricky water, rocks, muskeg, flies, and long, hard portages, the matter of why anyone should want to thrash around in the northern bush has been neglected.

However, the neglect has been intentional.

The assumption is that describing the place as true wilderness is sufficient advertisement. Those who know the pleasure and satisfaction of this kind of country will understand that they more then compensate for the risks and hardships. Those who do not know about this will not be interested in tripping about the Territories, no matter how evocative the prose.

For me, it stimulates the senses, promotes contemplation and strong feelings of self identity and gives the opportunity to meet phenomenon of rare beauty and interest.

In 25 years, more or less misspent in prodding about in improbable and bushy places from the Arctic to the Tropics, I have found no other place where the reality and sense of true wilderness is so strong as in the interior of the North.

This is another environmental imperative of the place.

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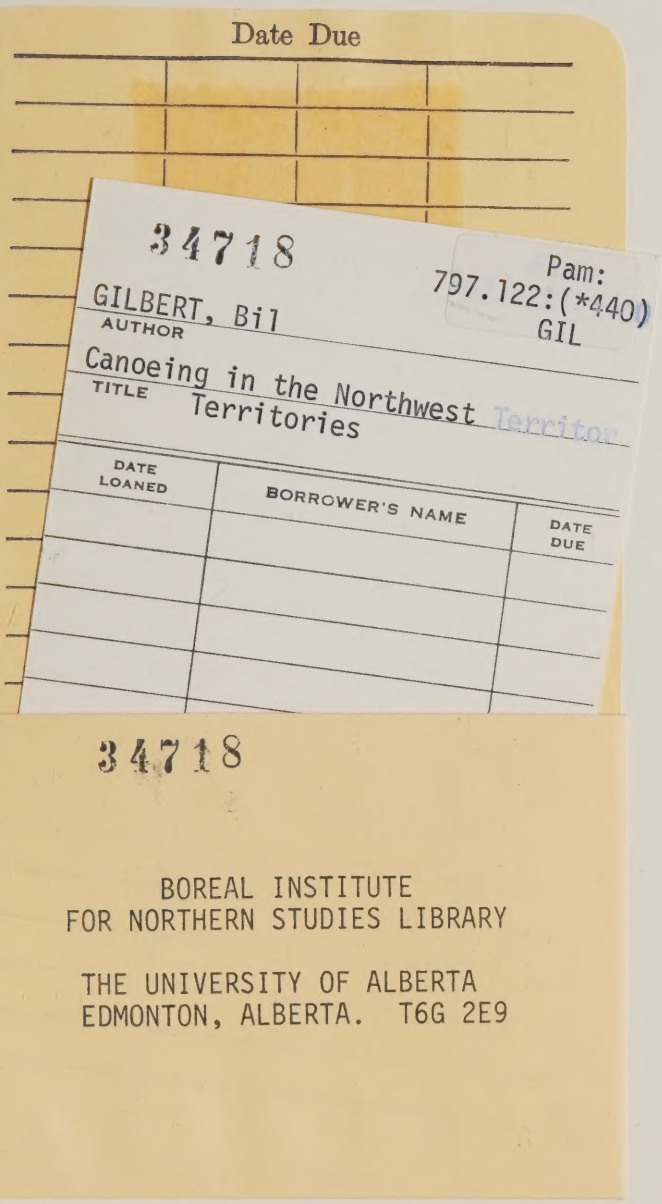

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